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SHALL WE UNITE THE CHURCHES?

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It is unhappily true that Christians, instead of uniting in the endeavor after the spiritual life, have become divided on all sorts of speculative and trivial differences. Instead of seeing that righteousness and purity and love are all-important, and theoretical opinions or methods of organization of quite subsidiary account, they have formed a new sect for every petty divergence of belief and church government. Instead of becoming a strong inclusive body of all those who hate sensuality and selfishness and sin, they have, too often, cast out of their fellowship those who would not bow before the historical and cosmological ideas of the dominant majority, have let ecclesiastical ambitions and rivalries split their forces, and so are now not One Church but a jostling crowd of hundreds of separate sects.

There is, to be sure, color and interest in the variety of churches; denominationalism has not been an unmitigated evil. It has stimulated discussion on religious matters, and a realization that the truth in regard to them is in dispute. This intellectual ferment is better than stagnation or subservience to authority; we do not want union at the price of mental slavery or a flabby acquiescence in tradition. A united church might be a menace to freedom of thought; a strong, centralized, ecclesiastical organization would easily become a tyranny. Free discussion in the older days was

only possible through separation from the mother-church. But if the new union is based upon a covenant and not a creed, the drawing together of churches should promote more discussion rather than choke it. At present each sect is pocketed, the thought of its members tending to revolve within a narrow circle; let them flow together, and the opposing ideas, freely meeting, should produce thought of a higher caliber.

To some extent, the rivalry of the sects has stimulated a healthy ambition for growth and enterprise, just as the competitive system in industry has been a spur to efficiency. But just as industry gains greatly in productiveness through the pooling of interests, so the churches could do far more effective work by merging their efforts. There can be a wholesome rivalry between the individual churches without the duplications and divisions of denominationalism. Sectarianism has done its work of stirring things up; the old crusts are broken; the fostering of the Christian life now needs systematic and scientific organization.

There will continue, no doubt, to be different tastes as to the forms of church services; some will prefer a highly ritualistic and liturgical service, others a simpler and more spontaneous expression of religious feelings. In the cities, neighboring churches may well develop along different lines to meet these

varying tastes. In the country churches something of a compromise must be sought, with perhaps different degrees of formality on different occasions. But there is probably less difference in temperamental need than is often supposed; these likings and dislikings are mostly a matter of habit rather than inherent. Even if not easily alterable in those whose tastes are formed, they are readily cultivable in the younger generation. And since they are only means, and of no significance in themselves, we may safely leave it to each local church to work out such forms of worship as its members may happen to be able to agree upon.

The movement toward church unity springs not from a mere dislike of heterogeneity, but from an irritation at waste of effort, at narrow parochialism and cliquiness, at the spectacle of a hundred little complacent, ineffective, dogmatic groups, where we ought to have breadth of vision and union of effort. It is essentially the passion to get ahead faster with the work which the church exists to do. At present many towns and cities are wastefully overchurched; it is not uncommon to find a thousand people supporting, meagerly and with difficulty, five or six churches, with five or six shamelessly underpaid ministers, five or six expensive and ugly church buildings, used a few hours a week apiece, and contributing nothing in taxes to the community, and perhaps as many parsonages, a burden to their occupants to run on the salaries they receive. There is probably very little difference in the preaching; it is a matter of different labels, different denominational connections, and superficial

differences in forms; what the various labels really meant to the founders of the sects is pretty completely forgotten by most of the members. Nothing really separates most of them but petty unreasoned prejudices and the chasms between social sets.

Here are a couple of instances from a recent periodical:

There is a little town in California with a population of 1,800 that has thirteen churches and twelve resident ministers living off the community, plus what they receive from Home Mission Boards. There is another town in the same State with a population of 50,000 that has fifty denominations represented among its churches. Some of these denominations have several churches in the town. Among the fifty denominations is a church called the "Church of God." They had a fight in this church and the offshoot from the original church called itself the "True Church of God." This church in turn had a fuss, and a third church was formed which assumed the name "The Only True Church of God."

This is an extreme situation. One must not generalize from a little town in California. Still, we all know of cases which are inexcusable. And scarcely anywhere is there the unity that there might be.

This needless multiplication of churches means half-filled pews, half-hearted enthusiasms, a generally dreary and depressing atmosphere in which it is difficult to cultivate an eager spirituality. It means provincialism and prejudice rampant, the initial vision that launched each sect long vanished, and each now living on a diet of half-understood formulas in a backwater of its

own out of the main current of thought. It means division of forces, impaired prestige, diminished power to fight sin and wrong. It means that there is no proper proportioning of church facilities to population, so that while some communities boast of several church edifices within sight of one another, many small communities have no place of worship whatsoever. In Colorado, in 1911, one hundred and thirty-three villages were found to be entirely without a Protestant church, over a hundred of them having no church of any sort.

We must recognize, however, that the obstacles in the way of church union are very great. Most men and women are tenacious in their convictions, however ill-founded; indeed, the more tenacious in proportion to the lack of clear thinking they have done, for much thinking is bound to breed respect for opposing ideas. They cling to their particular brand of theology with intense assurance, and to their denominational home with loyalty and pride. The only way to overcome this formidable obstacle is to show these obstinate sectarians that they can hold their views just as earnestly and openly in a big common church as in their separate corners. Some of the larger churches, notably the Anglican church, include, as it is, communicants of very widely varying convictions and tastes. We do not need to think alike to be able to join together for the purposes we do have in common.

Many people are, indeed, uneasy when detached from their accustomed denominational name, their accustomed pew in a particular church, a particular minister, and a particular form of service. Adjustment in these matters

can, however, easily be made, if the people concerned can be brought to feel the larger issues at stake.

Perhaps more serious is the momentum of the various denominational organizations, the personal ambitions and convictions of their officials, of the editors and publishers of denominational journals, and of the professors in denominational theological schools. These schools and periodicals keep sectarian loyalties alive, and bias students for the ministry so that they in turn perpetuate the parochialism of outlook. The remedy would seem to be in mergers, in inter-denominational schools and journals, and in a broader education for the ministry.

These sectarian prejudices would be impossible if the cliques that so largely control the churches had a broader and more accurate knowledge of history. Such an outlook would engender a humbler attitude, revealing the fact, for example, that no one really knows what the original form of Christian baptism was; or that it is really very doubtful if there was an unbroken episcopal line handing down the headship of the church from earliest times; or that the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, was a late and rather haphazard growth, a compromise or adjustment effected, as laws are formulated, through the clash of opposing argument, with much prejudice, much heat, a much less accurate knowledge of the life and teachings of Christ than we have today, and very little of what Matthew Arnold used to call "sweet reasonableness." This does not imply that the dogma of the Trinity may not embody a profound truth, or that the Baptists may not be correct in

their belief as to the original form of baptism, or the Episcopalians in their conception of the apostolic succession. It only shows that all these doctrines, and the others which separate the sects, being matters upon which there is very meager and conflicting evidence, ought to be very tentatively held, with generous recognition of the right of contrary judgment and an earnest recognition of the fact that they do not practically matter. Men are not saved by correct belief, or damned for incorrect belief, with regard to such matters as baptism or the episcopate or the Trinity—as the great majority prove that they realize through the readiness with which they transfer their membership from one sect to another upon marriage, or a change of residence.

Certainly these sectarian prejudices would be impossible if people generally had the passion for getting the greatest possible amount of service done. You do not quarrel over theology when you are at war and the battle is on. The essential thing is to spread the conception of Christianity as a crusade—a war to the death against sin and wrong; when we are absorbed in that campaign, our whole heart in the Master's business, we shall have no patience with anything that weakens our forces or keeps us apart. Just as the American colonies had to unite to win their independence, just as the Allies had to merge their commands in the recent war, so the churches must unite in the far greater and longer war which they exist to wage.

We shall never unite on theology, that is clear. We ought not to unite on theology, lest we petrify thought and cramp its progress. We do not need to

unite on theology, for differences in theology are compatible with a common platform, a common program of duties. The hope for union lies now, not as it did for so long, in repressing variations, but in making them nonessential. It lies in the possibility of an awakened realization of what a church, united in its hatred of evil, could accomplish, in a passion for the speedy coming of the Kingdom of God.

Happily, practical interests are driving us in this direction—the higher cost of living, which is making it impossible to support so many ministers, the increased cost of maintaining and heating church buildings, and the growing spirit of organization and economy in business, which cannot fail to influence ecclesiastical policy. But especially, the war, by putting men of all creeds shoulder to shoulder in a common enterprise, has made sectarian differences seem as insignificant as they are. And the absence of so many pastors at the Front has forced many congregations to meet together temporarily, and taught them thereby that differences in tradition do not prevent common work and worship. There are many interesting experiments in co-operation at the present time, both in the foreign fields and at home. But what will come of them is not yet clear.

There are two possibilities before us. One is that the denominations shall be kept and joined in a practical working union, mapping out and dividing up unoccupied territory, canceling all needless churches, and working together for social service, missions, and educational effort. On this plan everyone would join the nearest church, of what-

ever denomination it might be, and the smaller communities would have but one community church, here of one denomination and there of another. Such a working arrangement would quickly make denominational differences meaningless, and would probably be but a temporary step toward a completer union.

The other possibility is that in each overchurched community the congregations unite to form an undenominational church. This has the advantage that, for example, Episcopalians are not obliged to attend a Congregational church, or vice versa; by a general surrender of labels no one will feel himself an alien in the common church home. Especially the great masses of the "unchurched," who usually distrust denominational labels and particularisms, are more likely to be attracted, and the church more likely to be actually as well as in theory a genuine reflection of the religious life of the whole community.

The objection is often raised to these "union churches" that the lack of outside supervision, of a central organization to lean upon for advice and help, is a serious drawback. They have not a regular ministerial supply to draw upon. They are less likely to interest themselves in missionary work outside the immediate community. They are likely to develop discords through lack of overhead supervision. But all of these difficulties are temporary, and could be remedied by a centralized organization of undenominational churches. If the churches were taken away entirely from sectarian control and run as the schools are, by the community, as a public

concern too important to be left to private interests, we might see a renaissance of religion parallel to the development of education since that great field of human activity passed into the hands of the public. The union of church and state was dangerous so long as the church was autocratic and dogmatic; make it democratic, a federation of free local organizations; make it undogmatic, a place where thought may be free and fearless; and we may again let it become an institution belonging to the community as a whole.

It is going to be a slow development. The leaders of thought, the spiritual seers, are for the most part eager for it; but the majority of church members, and usually the pillars of the churches, the little groups that manage matters, are wedded to the present chaos. We must have patience, tact, good temper; we must be opportunists, glad to take any step that seems immediately useful in any place, and willing to tolerate confusion for a long time yet. But this is the great truth to be borne ever in mind: that what matters is not whether one is Episcopalian or Methodist or Unitarian, but whether one hates evil and is eager to learn to do well; not whether a church practices baptism by immersion or by pouring or by sprinkling, but whether it stands for righteousness, and works with eagerness and consecration for its prevailing. If that scale of values is kept in mind, we shall, slowly but surely, approach the day when we shall be so conscious of our essential unity that we shall come together, at last, as one flock, one Shepherd—the great universal church of Christ.